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Cynthia R. Chambers

East Tennessee State University, chamberc@etsu.edu

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Turning Pages Together: Supporting Literacy and Social Engagement

TURNING PAGES TOGETHER

supporting literacy and social engagement

BY CYNTHIA CHAMBERS

The Next Chapter Book Club model, which originated at the Ohio State University Nisonger Center, provides opportunities for adolescents and adults with disabilities to engage in literacy-based social activities in community settings. East Tennessee State University (ETSU) is one of four grantees to receive funding from the Tennessee Council on Developmental Disabilities to support Next Chapter Book Clubs across Tennessee.

Next Chapter Book Clubs at ETSU are coined Turning Pages Together, a name determined by an existing inclusive book club of individuals with and without intellectual disabilities. ETSU aims to lead six book clubs in the Tricities area in 2010-2011. To kick-off the project, Dr. Tom Fish from the Nisonger Center came to East Tennessee in early September to train book club facilitators and to demonstrate the Next Chapter Book Club model. Representatives from five cities in the East Tennessee area participated in the training. Since that event, four book clubs are up and running in Bristol and Johnson City. Other book clubs are being developed in Kingsport, Greeneville and Jonesborough.

One book club currently meets at Barnes & Noble in Johnson City. It is made up of five individuals with intellectual disabilities and an average of four individuals without disabilities. So far this group has read *Because of Winn Dixie*, *Shiloh*, *James and the Giant Peach*, *The Watsons Go to Birmingham*, and *Twilight*.

Andrea McCloud-Hoss has been facilitating the Johnson City book club for two years, and currently co-facilitates with her husband, A. J. "I began my involvement with Turning Pages Together anticipating that I would be positively contributing to the lives of individuals with disabilities, providing them with an opportunity to enrich their lives through literature and socialization," said Ms. McCloud-Hoss. "I feel I have done exactly that, but the unanticipated rewards of them exhibiting progress in their individual abilities and confidence has been even more encouraging to me. Their appreciation, dedication to the club and the friendships we have all gained is what motivates me to continue our meetings where we grow, learn and laugh together."

The impact of Turning Pages Together has been remarkable to watch over the past few years. As a university faculty member, I wanted to develop this program in East Tennessee to provide my pre-service teachers with hands-on opportunities to support individuals with disabilities. I also saw the need for adults with disabilities to have inclusive leisure activities in community-based settings. My university students and the book club members with disabilities have become a social network for each other. All participants, those with and without disabilities, have stepped up and assumed meaningful roles in the book club. No matter what the perceived ability level, all book club members provide support to each other through their help with reading, laughter, friendship or sense of caring.



Andrea McCloud-Hoss and Vicki Slump

Photo by Cynthia Chambers

Melissa Reed, a book club participant from ETSU, said, "Participating in Turning Pages Together has taught me that life is not about abilities or disabilities, but it is what we do with our abilities that counts."

Book club members with disabilities have communicated perspectives similar to those of members without disabilities. One member said, "I love to read [but] it doesn't matter if we stick to a book or not. For me it is about friendship and growing together." Two other book club members shared, "I enjoy reading the books and being with everyone," and "Book club gives me a good opportunity to get together with all my friends. I like being with everyone." Turning Pages Together has created a venue for access to social inclusion, membership in the community and active participation in meaningful leisure activities.

The Turning Pages Together project staff at ETSU are excited about the possibilities for reaching out to cities across the Tricities area with the new Next Chapter Book Club initiative. From our experiences so far, every book club establishes its own unique identity. Book clubs evolve to meet the needs of the participants and to create amazing relationships and support networks. For more information on Turning Pages Together, contact tpbookclub@etsu.edu or visit www.turningpagestogether.org.

Cynthia Chambers, PhD, is Turning Pages Together Director and assistant professor in the Department of Human Development and Learning at East Tennessee State University, and a member of the Tennessee Council on Developmental Disabilities.

Other sites for Next Chapter Book Clubs are

Memphis Center for Independent Living

Pamela Momon, (901) 726-6404, pamela@mcil.org

The Arc of Williamson County

Sharon Bottorff, (615) 790-5815, sbbarc@bellsouth.net

East Tennessee Technology Access Center

Marsha Willoughby, (865) 219-0130, willoughby.marsha@gmail.com